

OVER THE OREGON TRAIL

The Oregon Trail, along which so many thousands made their way into the Oregon Country and California at the time the West was being settled, is shown on the map on page 34. The trail followed in part the route of Lewis and Clark. But most of the emigrants traveled overland for the entire journey, while Lewis and Clark used boats and canoes for a large part of their journey.

The Route.—The map shows you that the Oregon Trail started from St. Louis, on the west bank of the Mississippi River, and followed the Missouri River for a considerable distance. Many of the pioneers who took this trail into the Oregon Country bought their supplies at St. Louis. But the real eastern end of the trail was at the small settlement of Independence in Missouri. From that point it struck off across the plains to the Platte River. It then followed along the Platte to a point near the present

city of Casper in Wyoming, where it turned southwest into the region around Great Salt Lake. There the trail that led to California broke off from the main trail which led to the Oregon Country.

From the region around Great Salt Lake the main trail turned toward the northwest into Idaho and the valley of the Snake River. This stream was reached where the city of Pocatello has grown up. From Pocatello the trail followed the Snake River for some distance, and then, leaving the river, it turned toward the northwest through Boise and crossed the Snake River again into the present state of Oregon. It crossed the northeastern part of that state to the Columbia River, which it followed to the Pacific.

The story of the trials and the sufferings of the thousands who followed this trail to the West is one of the great stories of our history. Hundreds and hundreds died on the way, but many thousands got safely through.

BAKER COUNTY, OREGON

THE OREGON TRAIL



National Historic Oregon Trail

Interpretive Center

at

Flagstaff Hill

THE OREGON TRAIL

should endeavor to arrive at St. Joseph as to be in readiness to take up the line in the middle of April . . ."

These simple instructions from Joel Poinsett's *Travels over the Rocky Mountains*, sent upon thousands of people started to become known as one of the greatest migration routes in history: The Oregon Trail.

For many years, the Oregon Trail symbolized the mountain men, traders—all had a hand in and charting of the Trail; toward the end of the Overland Stage and Pony Express Trail for a considerable distance, and the transcontinental railroad, the Union Pacific, parts of the same route. The Oregon Trail was the main stream of westward expansion. For all that, it can be contained in the hope for individual betterment and the determination to try.

HEROES OF THE OREGON TRAIL

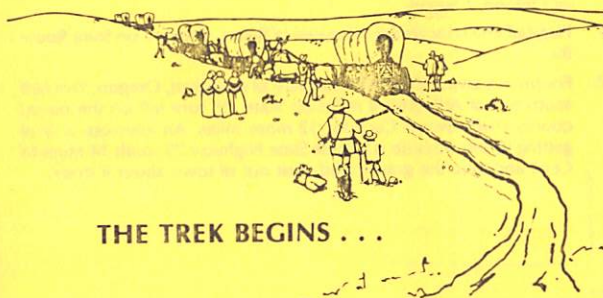
Astor's "Astorian" are often given credit for the route to Oregon territory, later known as the Oregon Trail. Astor sent his ship and land in 1810 to establish the company at the mouth of the Columbia River. His plan was to establish a Pacific base for the fur business that would become a core of the new American state. He intended to break the fur monopoly in the Pacific Northwest and American territory under American control. He sent Hunt with his party of "Astorian" crossing northern Wyoming in July of 1825. A partner in the company, traveled to the sea. Stuart later returned to New York for Astor. It was this journey which paved the way for the South Pass, in October of 1825.

WHY AN OREGON TRAIL?

For three things, two things combined to make a mass migration not only possible but in many ways was the international diplomatic scene: making distinct rumblings of ownership for the Oregon. It was thought that an influx of settlers in the area would cement the claim and avoid further difficulties with

At the same time, in 1837, the United States was rocked by a depression; money was tight, unemployment was high, and conditions in general were unacceptable for middle to low income people. In 1838 a man named Jason Lee, who earlier had spent some time in Oregon as a missionary, toured the eastern states giving lectures on the virtues of the West—Oregon in particular—and with the economic distress, his talks fell on very receptive ears.

In the spring of 1841 about 500 people assembled in a loose group at Independence, Missouri, on the Missouri River, the last "settled" point on the western frontier, and prepared for this journey west. They were not well organized; some had ox carts, others mule and horse drawn wagons, not a few were afoot, and without a knowledgeable guide they quickly became discouraged. The expedition rapidly fell apart and the potential migrants dispersed—though about thirty of them finally made it to Oregon by traveling with trappers and a missionary party of Catholic priests.



THE TREK BEGINS . . .

The first truly organized and cohesive attempt was made on Oregon in the early spring of 1842. One hundred people, under Dr. Elijah White, gathered at Independence and, with a professional guide from Fort Hall, in what is now Idaho, set out for the Willamette Valley of western Oregon.

The object of their journey was both simple and staggering. They were going to Oregon; but between the departure point and their goal lay two thousand miles of prairies, high mountains, parched deserts; hardships inconceivable to most of them. Many of the initial migrants were from rural midwestern and eastern communities, where town was a two-hour ride from the farm. They were starting on a venture wherein it would be over two months before they were to see a fur trading post.

That they started at all required fortitude. But more than just beginning this incredible first migration, White's group made it; half of them settled in Oregon and the other half moved down to California the following year.

Yet Elijah White and the migrants did more than demonstrate courage; they showed that it could be done in spite of the hardships involved. They blazed the trail for future wagon trains.

It was like opening a flood gate. In 1843 approximately 875 people made the journey; in 1844, 400 migrants made it; in 1845-46 over 5000 people completed the trek; in 1847-48 thousands more (including the Mormons who journeyed on part of the Oregon Trail seeking religious freedom in the Salt Lake area) traveled west. With the discovery of gold in California in 1848 came a virtual explosion in travel on the Trail; in April of 1849 over 20,000 riches-seeking dreamers left for California and Oregon, and there were many more in May.

TWO THOUSAND MILES — ONE STEP AT A TIME

With our modern conveniences it is difficult to understand the problems encountered by traveling emigrants. The distance we now cover in an hour in an automobile sometimes took them a whole week of hard work, struggle, and not infrequently, dying. A rainstorm now means a simple flick of the wiper switch; but in 1846 it could mean vicious flash-floods down dry riverbeds, impossibly mired wagons (some of which weighed over 4000 pounds fully loaded) and even drowning. The mountain pass we comfortably traverse in less than an hour often took the emigrants several days of pushing, pulling, loading and unloading the wagons time and again.

Just the trip could kill. In a dry summer, water sources would cease to exist; oxen would perish and families who had not brought sufficient water in barrels died of thirst. Other poorly planned caravans faced starvation when they found it impossible to live off the land—as some misinformed travelers had thought possible—and the family furniture they brought instead of the recommended 200 pounds of flour per person proved to be a fatal luxury. The route of the Oregon Trail rapidly accumulated cast-off items. One traveler wrote: ". . . I could have started a furniture store and equipped it from a ten mile stretch."

But of all the danger of the Oregon Trail the one most dreaded was cholera. Just the name of this terrible disease could send panic surging through a wagon train. In 1849 over 5000 people died of cholera in St. Louis; rapidly it spread to the trains heading west for the gold fields of California. The mysterious nature of the affliction made it doubly frightening; a seemingly healthy person could develop a slight fever in the morning, become unconscious at noon and be dead by evening.

From 1860 on, Indians became more openly hostile, and attacks on wagon trains added to the dangers inherent in the trip and the cholera.

THE NEW LAND

In the end, evaluating what the emigrants achieved with their sacrifices is difficult. With bright hopes and an immense amount of innocent courage, close to 275,000 Americans made the journey west from Independence, Missouri, between 1841 and 1869. Many of them died;



there is a grave for every mile, and an almost uncountable number were injured. Most certainly none of them were the same people they had been after the four to six month journey.

Yet what they accomplished is incredible. With determination, sweat, blood and muscle the Oregonians welded the northwest one-third of a continent to the rest of the Nation and left us a heritage of courage and determination that is a vital part of the American experience.

PARTICULARS OF TRAIL TRAVEL

The Emigrants

Settlers who traveled the Oregon Trail were by and large substantial citizens. In the first place, they had to have considerable resources to afford the trip. Roughly \$800 to \$1200 was required to obtain a proper outfit and get by for a whole year without planting and harvesting a crop. Ordinary subsistence farmers never could accumulate capital on that scale without having a good farm to sell.

The Supplies

| Total suggested supplies for three persons - one year with oxen team consisted of: | | | |
|--|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| 3 rifles at \$20.00 | \$ 60.00 | 3 pairs of pistols at \$15.00 | 45.00 |
| 5 barrels of flour, 1080 lbs | 20.00 | Bacon, 600 lbs. | 30.00 |
| Coffee, 100 lbs. | 8.00 | Tea, 5 lbs. | 2.75 |
| Sugar, 150 lbs. | 7.00 | Rice, 75 lbs. | 3.75 |
| Dried fruit, 50 lbs. | 3.00 | Salt and pepper, 50 lbs. | 3.00 |
| Saleratus, 10 lbs. | 1.00 | Lard, 50 lbs. | 2.50 |
| Lead, 30 lbs. | 1.20 | Tent, 30 lbs. | 5.00 |
| Bedding, 45 lbs. | 22.50 | Cooking utensils, 30 lbs. | 4.00 |
| Matches | 1.00 | Candles, soap, 50 lbs. | 5.30 |
| Private baggage, 150 lbs. | ---- | TOTAL COST FOR 3 | \$225.00 |